

Fish & Wildlife Service—National Conservation Training Center
Conservation and Community Public Lecture Series
Speaking with John Grabowska

Speakers:

Mark Madison

John Grabowska

[audio start]

Mark: Hi. Today's Thursday, August 27th, 2009, and we're doing a podcast with National Park Service filmmaker John Grabowska. John's here premiering his new film, *Yellowstone: Land to Life*. Welcome, John. Good to have you out here.

John: Thank you. Good to be here.

Mark: Why don't you tell us just a little bit about the film?

John: It's a geology film, but we don't want that to scare anybody. We didn't use a lot of scientific, technical terms, but we did want to make the connection between the geology of Yellowstone—which, after all, was the reason the park was established, and it is one of the most fascinating geological places on earth to go. But we wanted to demonstrate the connection between the geology of Yellowstone and how it has affected not only the wildlife of Yellowstone, but the evolution of the wildlife, the plants as well as the animals. So making that connection was the primary thrust of the film.

Mark: You probably had to go to Yellowstone and scout out a number of locations.

John: Yeah, I *had* to.

Mark: That was a very, very tough part of your job. The second toughest job you'd ever love. You were a former Peace Corps volunteer too. But if somebody were to go to Yellowstone, what were some of the more spectacular geological places they should go to? Perhaps some that are off the beaten track or less well known?

John: Well interestingly enough one of the most heavily visited spots, the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, most people don't think of as a thermal area, although there are a few thermals that you can see. But the Yellowstone River goes over the falls 308 feet. You can go out to Artist's Point. It's incredibly scenic. You can take wonderful pictures, and everybody likes to see the colors and the jagged shapes of the canyon.

What is little known is that what you're actually seeing there, eroded away by the river, is the underground of a thermal field that is now, obviously, no longer spitting geysers up into the air. So, there are, and that's just one of thousands of examples. Yellowstone is the kind of place, unfortunately, most people only spend a day and a half to two days there. You could spend a month there, a year there, and you're always learning something new, something fascinating, from the history, the human history of the place, as well as the big wow! The geyser fields, Old Faithful, the waterfalls, the wildlife. So it's, as well as the microbial life in the hot springs, in those huge microbial mats around the hot springs.

That's another thing that most people don't know, that DNA testing, which is so common in crime labs now, came from a discovery at Yellowstone, where the microbes. I don't exactly understand all of the science, but someone from I think the University of Wisconsin was doing research there, and tracked polymer rays, the thermophiles that are living being that are in scalding acidic water, and was able to use that, that eventually resulted in DNA testing. So that's the kind of thing. The earthquakes. It's being shaken by earthquakes, not constantly, but frequently. It's a giant volcano. It, you can see the predator, prey relationship, just the dramatic changes in riparian flora that have come about due to the introduction of an apex predator, the grey wolf. So, Yellowstone, the richness of subject matter at Yellowstone is endless.

Mark: Truth be told, a podcast doesn't really do justice to the visual flair of this beautiful 20 minute film. Where are some of the places people could watch the film if they wanted to see it?

John: Well, the best place is in Yellowstone itself. So that you can see the film and then go outside and have an immediate personal experience with the park itself. And it is shown. Its primary venue is Canyon, the name of this little village that has a visitor's center and lodging and is as close as a developed area as you can get to the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone and Lower Falls. So in the Canyon Visitor's Center, which was recently renovated, there's a very large exhibit hall with outstanding scientific exhibits to examine in detail as well as broadly the geology of Yellowstone. There's a theatre there, 250, 300 seat theatre. Superb theatre. Wonderful acoustics. It's shown in high definition, 5.1 surround sound. So, that's the ideal thing, is to go across the country, and go to Yellowstone and experience it there.

The park is also streaming it on their website, so that's another method of outreach. But also, it is going to be broadcast nationally as a primetime special by PBS September 8th of this year, and then will be rebroadcast frequently at 2 a.m. and 5 a.m. and 8 p.m.

Mark: Pledge week.

John: Exactly. When I see it's on at 2 in the morning, I think, oh, they're aiming at the young mother with a colicky baby demographic.

But it's what's called an Evergreen show. The science is not so of the moment that it's going to change. It's a broad, big look at the geology, so the show will be as fresh 5 or 8 years from now as it is today. And on PBS it will still be seen 5 to 8 years from now. So it will probably reach in the first year of broadcast, as many, more people than would see it in the park. So, we definitely want to serve those visitors who come to the park. Give them a wonderful experience. Provide context and inspiration. But we also want to reach the people who, because of time constraints or financial constraints may not get to Yellowstone but can still get to some of the park's interpretive programming.

Mark: Last question. You actually have a very interesting job. You are a filmmaker for the National Parks Service. What do you do exactly? I think a lot of people might not even know the Parks Service has a film unit. You've been doing this since 1981?

John: I have. And I'm also a planner. I work at a Service Center, the Harpers Ferry Center, about 90 miles outside of DC. And parks across the country will come to the Harpers Ferry Center, and whether they're looking for a map, a brochure, museum exhibits, or a film, there is a cadre of experts there who can assist the park. Much of what we do is we work with them hiring a firm, sometimes geographically located, sometimes with a certain subject matter expertise, to work with that park and provide a film. And in those cases, I am their advocate. I work as an executive producer, write the scope and specs, and oversee the production of that film.

In other cases, there are some parks who have seen what I do and want the kind of film that I produce, and they come and ask for me specifically. So a lot of what I do is planning consultation with parks, serving as an advocate for them when they get a film, and in some cases, make the film specifically on that subject matter.

Mark: And what are some of the films you've made previous to the Yellowstone film?

John: I've executive produced films from New Bedford Whaling to Yosemite, and I've made films myself from Wrangell--St. Elias National Park Preserve in Alaska, the largest national park you've never heard of. At 13 million acres, it's larger than Switzerland with higher mountains, to an interesting interagency film that covered everything from National Parks in New

Mexico to State Park Land to BLM and Forest Service. So on the high desert of North Carolina, the Outer Banks of North Carolina. *The Ribbon of Sand*. That film has been on PBS as well. And then this Yellowstone film is the most recent one that I've completed.

Mark: Well John. Thank you very much for your time. We're going to be showing John's film tonight at 7 p.m. in his home town of Shepherdstown at the National Conservation Training Center, and hopefully we'll have you back when your next film is done.

John: Looking forward to it.

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